

HAVE YOU SEEN BLACKIE?

Meadowlands: facts and the aftermath

>From Grattan Puxon

As many of you will know from media reporting, the full weight of "law enforcement" was brought down on the heads of residents of Meadowlands, Chelmsford, who were deemed in breach of planning regulations - and nothing more.

In the aftermath, with fences broken and burning and a giant JCB nearby tearing out the plots, 8-year-old Mary McCann, ran to me through the smoke. "What is it Mary?" I asked, myself already overwhelmed by the grief of it all and especially concerned as she had given me a hug before going to bed. "Have you seen Blackie, my little dog?"

Chelmsford Borough Council was in possession of a valid Planning Application by the present owners of the 4 acres of land at Cranham Road, Little Waltham, to which the council had not yet even responded.

The eviction was a direct action operation undertaken without an Injunction against the present owners (though an Injunction had been obtained in respect of the previous owners). The enforcement officer was Christine Lyons and she, and those counsellors who supported her action have a lot to answer for - and should be made to answer by all of us, in a collective and co-ordinated effort.

Unless we do this, and begin promptly to so, similar enforcement will be brought to bear on other private caravan parks around the country. But I think particularly of Dale Farm, Oak Lane, Basildon, which John Baron MP and a local "anti-Traveller" coalition already have in their deadly myopic vision.

As Patrick Egan, spokesman for Dale Farm reported to this list last week, John Baron has a meeting with Tony Blair lined up and intends not doubt to argue that the level of violence brought to bear at

Meadowlands - which included a horde of fully-armoured, shield-bearing Riot police - should now be employed not only to physically destroy Dale Farm (the largest Travellers' community in the UK) but to wreck the lives of those who have, with great hopes, worked so hard to create this virtual village.

On the issue of violence on our side. Yes, stones were thrown and punches too. But this was a puny response to the overwhelming force and brutality employed by Constant workers contracted to "do the dirty work" for Chelmsford. One young Traveller (in fact a lad working for Jim McCann) who sat on the ground chained to the wooden gate, his arms out to the sides looking to all the world like the figure of Christ on the cross, was set upon by Constant workers in a melee so thick and furious I could not see to the centre of it and then taken away by riot police. The last I knew (last night) he was being held at, I believe, Chelmsford Police Station).

The injured boy was Tommy McCann, who was carried away with a suspected broken leg, sustained in this same melee.

As any one got the time today to call Chelmsford Police Station and follow up on the fate of those arrested? Up to four people according to loose information. In charge of the operation was Chief Insp Craig McGarrigle (01245 491212) Divisional commander is Julia Jeapes. Both of whom participated in the pre-operation conference requested by the NTAG and TERF and attended by Cliff Codona and myself.

Anyone ready to take up the issue of the police role - I can in due course supply with the official Minutes of this meeting and eye-witness statements could and should be collected.

A mere so-called police complaint will only lead to a whitewash. This needs to be taken up at Home Office level so that thought can be given - sane thought - as to what is to happen next time (rather, there must be no next time).

CRE addressed a letter to Chelmsford Borough Council just before pointing out their duty to make an "assessment" report prior to the operation as to its pact on inter-community relations, in accordance with the 2000 (Amended) Act. Saraha Barton at CRE is involved (02079390000)

In addition, as also brought out on this list recently, Human Rights officers at Strasbourg, are waiting, right now, for full information and documentation (photographs and videos would help) of such operations as this so that an assessment - and perhaps later a legal judgement - can be made of the link between the background racial prejudice, now being fanned to hatred by the media and others, and the collective and individual actions of those who participate on the enforcement side.

The first opportunity for these tasks and others to be considered and (be it informally) decisions made as to who will get stuck into this could be the meeting of the TLRC on Thursday (4 to 6 pm) at Portcullis House, Westminster, before the launch of the IPPR report on Traveller accommodation "Moving Forward".

ISSUES RAISED BY MEDLOWLANDS

1. The application for an Injunction and Judicial Review, successfully obtained in the case of Bulkington Fields, was refused because Christine Lyons told the High Court Judge that alternative plots were available for everyone (there were about 25 trailers in terms of accommodation. Homes Investigations Officer Mrs Janet Beauchamp (01245 606667) took a leading part both in the long homes registration session at Chelmsford Borough Council offices on Friday (22 January) and at the emergency homeless office set up at Tufnell Hall, Little Waltham, yesterday, purportedly for the purpose of assisting families rendered homeless by the eviction and destruction of their caravan park.
- 2 In fact in reality no one at Meadowlands was aware of the existence of this emergency office, and it seems to have been created merely for appearances sake. I found out about it only after asking Chief Insp McGarrigle who was present to represent the CBC at Meadowlands. The categorical answer was that no official of the Council was on ground at the caravan park or on Cranham Road - only their agents, Constan (the person in charge is familiar to me and Cliff Codon from previous encounters at Woodside and Bulkington Fields). One issue here is what efforts were made by the CBC Strategic Housing Services to inform and assist those being evicted that their services were available. The emergency office (a village hall) was about a mile and half away and strict police roadblocks were being maintained. Cranham Road carried notice warning that the road would be closed for a week. The

roadblocks were reminiscent of those set up at Horsmonden, with Home Office approval, at the time of the ban on the horse fair.

Our belated delegation to this office required permission from Chief

Insp McGarrigle. Later in the day, even Father Joe Brown had difficulties with the roadblocks and had to make detours.

To the best of my knowledge no resident of Meadowlands had been informed of the existence of the emergency office and if they had known would have most likely (in my experience of the day) been refused permission to proceed there - had they attempted to go on their own (which would have meant living caravans and children, animals and property to the mercy on Constan and the JCB, which (in a dangerous manner) was crushing fencing, hardstanding, huts etc) Only because the NTAG and TERF had established relations and some authority with the police and CBC prior to the operation, were we able to obtain permission to proceed (twice in the day) to the emergency office - having discovered, by accident through Chief Insp McGarrigle that it existed (McGarrigle, until quite late in the operation) kept some distance off the ground at the corner of Cranham Road and Domey Lane, and was certainly not "available" to residents. Needless to say Constan were not giving out any information about the emergency office and the CBC prior to the operation.

3 Despite these difficulties (which I believe to have been deliberate) three of the residents families applied, with the essential assistance of Cliff Codona, Father Joe and myself, for temporary accommodation. As of last night Jim McCann and Lilly, and children including disabled Patrick, Patrick Purcell, wife and children - whose caravan had been so severely damaged by Constant that it was no longer habitable and in any case was on a low-loader - a Margaret McCann and her brother Justin, with three children, were on their way to temporary accommodation in the chalets of a former holiday camp Silverwoods at Ten Penny Hill, near St Osyth, Essex (the manager is Simon on 01206 250366) calls) I have Jim's number too. They could not take any of their dogs or other animals with them. They were left, some in sheds, to Constan's attention. For people and animals it was the coldest night of the year.

4 I must return now to the issue of the much hoped for Injunction. The whole purpose and spirit of the resistance to the eviction needs to be understood. It was given a boost on Sunday by the visit of Dr Boris Muntyanu and Florina Zoltan, both Roma Federation members, the raising over the caravan park of a

Romani flag, given by Boris and accompanied by many inspired words from him and the remark of Patrick McCann as he nailed it to a pole, "I'm proud to be doing this."

Together, with great leadership from Francy McCann, we tried against all odds to hold out because we understood, we believed, that there was a very good chance of an Injunction being obtained, and likely as not the go-ahead for a Judicial Review as had been so recently obtained in the case of Bulkington Fields. On this occasion, on Friday, the judge accepted wholesale and without question, the patently false statement of Christine Lyons that plots were available at a) South Mimms - which the "emergency office" finally admitted was untrue b) at Swanley, Kent, which Donald Kenrick in a written statement refuted (however that statement and another by me were never seen by the judge) at c) Epsom.

We held the various lines of trenches and fires for five hours (until approximately 12 noon). The caravan park was still occupied at three o'clock, and caravans were still on the ground as late as five o'clock. Innumerable messages were relayed - almost a running commentary - were relayed to both Neil Weekes and Jeremy Brown, the two solicitors involved and relayed on to Marc Wallis, barrister (we were even informed that Owen Davis, QC was on standby ready to take it up with a judge of the Appeal Court in the event that the High Court judge would not budge from his initial acceptance of the false statement made by Lyons). One is reminded of the desperate appeals to the United Nations sent out by the brave defenders of Budapest at the time of the Russian invasion in 1956.

We were told it was advisable to accept - or at least explore - the "offer" plots at Epsom.

We negotiated with the head of the Constant squad that two trailers should be taken down to Epsom on low-loaders, one of them that of Mrs Cathleen Buckley, accompanied by Cliff Codona - so that Cliff could report back on the conditions at Epsom (it was not known which site they were referring to - Cox's Lane or another). Mrs Beauchamp admitted there was a problem at Epsom; due to vehicles of a scrap yard being placed in the access road caravans could not reach the park. But this was supposed to be being taken care of through liaison with police at Epsom.

This arrangement was fully agreed upon. Two caravans to be taken there initially; up to another ten to follow if conditions proved satisfactory (this was ignoring the issue quite rightly raised by Cliff that the current residents at Epsom might not find the proposed newcomers agreeable to them). At the time I left Meadowlands at somewhere after 5 pm yesterday (light was beginning to go) the initial convoy to Epsom had not even started. I believe now that Constan chief, though initially agreeing to the arrangement changed his because he did not want two low-loaders tied up for so many hours going to Epsom when he had many more caravan to remove from the land. Some of the other caravans designed by Fancy McCann to go to Epsom (if Cliff gave a favourable report) were still either in the lane or on low-loaders when I and Father Joe finally left.

The point is in principle we accepted the "offer" of accommodation for up to ten caravans at Epsom, including that for Mrs Buckley, a client I believe of the CLP in Birmingham. So it seemed that one of the two named in the original application for an Injunction had somewhere to go. But as relayed to Jeremy Brown, a maximum of ten caravans could be accommodated at Epsom. However, at least another 15 remained to be accommodated. In proven fact there was nowhere for these 15 caravan to be placed legally. One we believed, at that hour, that this was a sound basis for an application for an Injunction. It was about 11 am. The eviction operation had been successfully resisted, with some injuries and arrests, for four hours. We were told it would take about another three hours, including the travel of Mark Willis to London (no blame meant here) to get a hearing before a judge (or the original judge).

The issues were, I understand a) the false statement made by Lyons a) the failure of CBC to provide or indicate actually available plots for ALL those being evicted c) breaches of the agreement made at the High Court on Friday relating to the ongoing confiscation of caravans (about a dozen by that point) by Constan and the taking of these caravans, one or two large 40 ft mobile homes, to a storage facility somewhere in Hertfordshire, probably a hundred miles or more away and without the owners having access and unable to remove personal possessions, including warm clothes, needed for the children, and adults, to survive the oncoming coldest night of the year.

In the event while Mark Willis took up the issues with the legal people at CBC, no second application for an Injunction was made. I was informed by

Jeremy Brown that the CBC were meeting the statutory duties by offering, as a temporary, emergency response, bed and breakfast accommodation (the fact that one word from the CBC and the same families could have stayed in in their caravans on their own caravan park, alleviating at one stroke from all the trauma caused them by Constan/CBC operation, remained hidden behind an impenetrable barrier of bureaucraticinsanity).

Jeremy explained that the proposal to apply for an in Junction was undermined because the two clients of the CLP appeared to be getting some accommodation, and secondly the rest had the option of B&B. His view that "temporary" might mean two weeks. Ms Bauchamp put it at 33 days before temporary might be re classified as permanent. If the permanent stage is reached, then the CBC has (or may have?) an obligation to find places for those involved on a caravan site - their own or that of another council (?).

Meanwhile, they have to get their caravans and in the case of Jim McCann is mobile home, back from Constan. Views differ, at the time of writing, as to whether the owners will have to pay quite a large storage fee or not. In the case of Jim, Cliff said this could be as much as £2,000.

5 Of course, there is the issue of the CBC now "in its rights" to claim from the victims the £100,000 cost of the destruction operation.

6 We need also to raise the various aspects of the flaunting and violation of the Human Rights Act. Some else could better explain this and propose what can be done under this head. Human Rights officers at Strasbourg are waiting for our collective reports to materialise.

IMPLICATIONS: THE FUTURE

I have to say, having just stopped for a cup of tea, that unless our collective response to the Meadowlands outrage is swift and effective the mass of Travellers, mostly not linked to or members of the various organisations, are "done". At the same time, it should be borne in mind by both supporters and opponents, that Travellers, rapidly organising around the NTAG and TERF, are now in the mood for and capable of a titanic

"reply" of their own.

Their bastion, as mentioned above, is Dale Farm, and the various smaller satellite yards in the vicinity of Basildon. The Sheridans, who own many of the plots, have demonstrated over recent years that they are able to call together - as they did at Great Yarmouth and Rhyl - up to 700 caravans. The "Gypsy invasion" from Eastern Europe dreamt up by the rightwing press would pale into insignificance by comparison. At the start of this winter TERF, and its newly-formed Human Rights Monitoring group (= human shield), called for a moratorium on "move-on" operations in the triangle between the A12 and the A130 in Essex, with Chelmsford at its apex.

This largely held, thanks partly to a more tolerant attitude by Essex County Council, until Chelmsford Borough Council took matters into their own filthy and bloodstained hands.

Note though that Patrick McCann, when he attempted to move onto his brother's land in the Braintree area last night, as a refugee from Meadowlands, was immediately harassed by police and told to "get off".

The ethnic-cleansing, commenced so brutally in November 2002 at Woodlands, in Bedfordshire (setting aside for the moment that it started with the hangings of 1554), carried through at Cows Roast, barked and Bulkington Fields and now done so decisively and implacably at Meadowlands, is sweeping across the country. Travellers are desperate and will take desperate measures, in defence of homes on wheels and their menaced families. The neo-fascist attacks on Roma in Eastern Europe (200 murders documented to date by TERF, the URYD, the ERRC and others) - is what is happening now in the UK a prelude to such a situation developing here? The burning in effigy of Gypsies at Firle (no prosecution in sight yet) and the murder of 15-year-old Johnny Delaney (denied by the judge to be racially motivated despite police protestations that it was), and the horror of Monday, are very real danger signals to be ignored at our peril.

Cliff Codona, on his way today to the official Holocaust commemoration in Belfast (where Roma will get a minimal mention) fears that a second victim will die sooner rather than later. Anyone who witnessed Meadowlands might say

the next will be a bloodbath.

7 This is a proposal, rather than a issue. Dr Boris Muntyanu and I, with Richard Solly of the Churches Commission for Racial Justice, last Tuesday (20 Jan) met with the Rev Charles Hedly, rector of St James Church, Piccadilly. Rev Hedly has agreed to the London event of the world-wide >Commemoration of Roma Victims< to take place on Sunday, 1 August, at this beautiful, centrally-located Wren church.

I talked about this briefly yesterday (dulling a lull in the talks at the emergency housing centre) with Father Joe

Please will those of you attending the TRLC meeting on Thursday take this opportunity to discuss the Commemoration and how we can make this a really worthwhile and "showcase" event. Including as it does commemoration of the death of young Johnny Delaney, this must be considered in the light of the need for a wholehearted response to Meadowlands (and the lack yet of Government action).

A dignified, solemn response, all of us standing together in church, far from the muck and the melee.

POST-SCRIPT

Jim McCann has just called from St Osyth. The room allocated him (we were told it was to be a complete chalet) was unheated. He had to move in with that allocated to his sister, which meant 12 people in one room.

He says the place was dirty and overcrowded and the manager there expressed astonishment that CBC had sent them there, in view of the already strained conditions.

Jim says he and Lilly, little Mary and the rest, are leaving, now (9 am) in his car. He will buy a trailer today and pull on to a place at Leighton Buzzard. That is likely to be a short stay as there is already an enforcement notice out on the land. He hopes to have time to put in some hard standing on another piece of land near Basildon

He asks that all of us stand by him and Lilly and support him in the coming days and weeks. He particularly asks that when he puts in for Planning Permission at Basildon, and if it goes to an inquiry, evidence is provided,

both written and photographic of what he and his family have just been put through by Chelmsford Borough Council and Constan. "Thank you and God Bless," he says to those who came to stand with him at Meadowlands.